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ABSTRACT

Noting that urbanization is a useful context in which to study the communications system, this paper offers suggestions for newspapers to help them adapt the realities of the urban community in order to redefine news gathering procedures and reorganize newsrooms around the process of urbanization. The paper proposes six areas for both the study and the practice of urban journalism: (1) civic images, urban symbolism, and civic identity; (2) civic boosterism and urban journalism practice and policy; (3) decentralization and urban decline and the resulting dilemma for communications systems; (4) urban power, alienation, and decision making; (5) ecological pressures and the urban growth ethic in the media; and (6) the future of media in the metropolis. The paper concludes that if journalism education and practice are to relate more to the community they need to give more attention to the nature of the urban audience and its vision, values, changes, decisions, crises, and decline. (FL)

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URBANIZATION AS A CONTEXT FOR A SYSTEM OF FUNCTIONAL NEWS BEATS

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Introduction/Purpose:

Much recent literature on the press suggests that news content is created and manufactured because of internal factors in its conception. (Tuchman, Fishman, Argyris, Roshco, Gans, Epstein) Perhaps a focus on the external audience and community needs would be useful in order to respond to outside issues and problems in an urban society beyond the sometimes self-serving narcissism and myopia of the newsroom.

To forecast the emerging media future, an external adaptation to the needs and functions of the urban community as they relate to the communications system may help re-define the press and its content, re-organize news-gathering around community processes rather than mere buildings, and help journalists develop an enlightened systems approach to the technological, economic and human challenge of an urban world.

Urbanization is an extremely useful context with which to study the communications system, and a viable tool for both the teaching and practice of urban journalism. (Meier, Lyle, Mandelbaum) The urban framework for a view of the press allows for emphasis on the non-mass, mini-media, and for non-verbal communications, and other media forms which frequently reveals more of how people experience and communicate in the urban environment than do the one-directional, single message, simultaneous mass media designed to market vicarious information rather than distribute usable information and facilitate communication. The urban frame of reference is also useful for assessing the practices of journalism education and the professional performance of the media. In summary, the relationships between communication and urbanization and between

media and urban affairs are so fruitful for research and teaching that one wonders why the mixture is still relatively uncommon. (Webber, Lerner, Burd).

There are roughly six areas in which analysis, theory and research on these relationships seem useful. They might include (1) civic images, urban symbolism and civid identity; (2) civic boosterism, urban journalism practice and policy; (3) decentralization and urban decline and the dilemma for communications; (4) urban power, alienation, decision-making by both majority and minority, and criticism of the media; (5) ecological pressures and the urban growth ethic in the media; and (6) the future of media in metropolis. In order, a normative theme seems to be the vision of the city, the values which generates action, the change that city, citizens and media face, the decisions that are made on direction, the crisis of the natural forces vs urban pressures; and the possible decline of the city and communications.

In each of these six areas, the urban audience might be characterized as (1) needing a mental and visual image and depending on the media for it; (2) seeking to develop and implement values and needing media to assess both means and ends; (3) facing the decline of central place with all its economic and communal consequences; (4) deciding which alternatives to propose, debate and accept; (5) dealing with the potential and limits of the natural environment; and (6) fearing the future and the impact of communications technology. In all of these areas, one might look at the characteristics of the urban audience from the external viewpoint of the functional realities "out there" rather than from the internal viewpoint of the media forms of practice or teaching Also, one might match the theories and principles of urban communication with the practices and problems of urban journalists.

Civic Images, Urban Symbolism and Civic Identity

The total urban audience depends on the media to "experience" the environment symbolically because of the increasing difficulty in large metropolitan areas of

first-hand, personal exposure to it. This civic shorthand enables the citizen to come to terms with the urban realities and to find an identity and to form a basis for action should he wish to do so. (Wohl & Strauss, Simmel, Wirth, Lynch, Kato, Milgram, Gould and White).

The need to belong and to have a sense of place is characteristic of urban masses who live in fragmented communities, and must depend on the photographic image of the architecture of the central business district, the colors and mascots of civic sports teams or the sounds of city songs to reinforce the editorial "we" of the metropolis. The tribal defense of the city's reputation and profile against outside threats and detractors becomes a full-time task for the media makers of mental maps for the geography of the mind. (Downs & Meyer, Carr, Swinburne, Dagenais, Burd).

For the working journalist, the urban audience seeks guidance on urban design and development. There is the need for the architectural beat--the writer who deals with the "skeleton" of the city--its bones, its form and structure including housing, landscape, housing, technology. The urban audience needs to know the processes of land use, how decisions are made on planning and zoning, site selection, real estate, and the form and structure of transportation which is inseparable from the communications process.

The urban "skeleton" must also move, and the urban audience must understand the process is related to land use, the nature of the city and the natural environment. They also need to know how to use the transportation facilities, the consequence of that and how they can have input to affect them. This news beat should integrate the total movement of the urban audience on land, water and in the air, and from autos and airplanes to pedestrian malls and elevators. Few urban audience needs and characteristics are so fundamental as the form and movement of its citizens. Media facilitate the mental image of the city and can in some cases replace transportation. Identity can be maintained if there is a shared continuity. Transportation

and images can be the structural "glue". (Cowan, Jones) The vision of a city is thereby perpetuated.

Civic Boosterism, Urban Journalism Policy, Practice

Civic values often follow the image sought and projected. The most frequent values reflected in the mass media are those of the civic superlative as a news value and self-fulfilling prophecy. City growth, planning and renewal are tied inseparably to the agenda of urban journalism. The civic ideology is reflected most readily in the daily newspapers, but also in radio and television, movies, and magazines. The city is packaged and sold as media managers are a type of civic leader and newsmen's norms reflect civic salesmanship. (Devereux, Ernst, Burd).

The media are frequently a participant as well as an observer and civic action is an extension of the image in the media content. The general public interest is often a variety or projection of the self-interest of the media as urban institutions. (Burd) The needs of the urban audience are often expressed as those primarily of jobs and economic security, a good place to live, and a chance to escape if desired because of the traditional anti-city sentiment in both the press and in American society. (White(s), Burd).

The format of urban journalism tends to reflect the internal workings of the media rather than the total experience of the urban audience. Thus, real estate and business pages rather than homes and labor emphases; schools and spectator sports rather than leisure and education in general; accidents, obituaries and death rather than health, medicine and transportation; and disaster and crime rather than human relations and harmony with the natural environment. In other words, the experienced functions of community by the audience are secondary to the perceived notions of news by the media and its forms and vested self interests. Often the generation of civic action by the

media comes from boosting media values rather than through rational debate in which the outcome may threaten the system to which the media is tied.

Decentralization, Urban Decline and Media Dilemmas

When the stability of the traditional city has been threatened, the institutions with the most to lose have cried in alarm. Media in fear of decentralization and the rise of the post-industrial city without a central place tied to print have made change a crisis. As the suburban and electronic media have enhanced decentralization and departure from the old central city, the dailies have sought new zone sections, specialized reporters, recognition of the minorities in the central city, support for the federal urban renewal programs, new technology, and an accelerated civic participation. Decentralization and central city bankruptcy have created a civic agenda in which the survival and maintenance of the central city and its downtown have been shown an inseparable and linked to the same fate of urban residents, despite any contradictions.

Faced with such changes, there have been signs of reporting on real estate and business going beyond self interest to general concerns of community and the environment. (Clay et al) The first signs fo the urban journalist came through a combination of architectural and real estate reporting, and this came when urban decentralization threats arrived on the American urban scene in the late 1950s and into the 1960s. Even criticism of the economic establishment became somewhat accepted. (Clay, Jacobs et al)

Hopefully, this beat would become the economic base beat, with full consideration of how the total metropolitan area is affected by changes in structure and form and how urban and regional economies operate and who pays what for what received, and how citizens can and should be invcived in priorities and provision of services. The press has been faced with the decline of the old central city economic base, while itself preaching and escaping to the outer rims. This schism on the maintenance of the old in spite of change is a major

dilemma for the press. Often the ends of the city and its size and layout have not been discussed--only the means to maintain and perpetuate what has been. (Kristol, Bogart, Welles).

Next to economic maintenance of the "muscle" of the urban form and structural skeleton could be the stability of the physical and mental health of urban citizens. THis beat might be the health and medical beat rather than the traditional emphasis on the breakdown of the same. NEws has traditionally emphasized the crises of disease, death, and hospitals and the "misery beat" of police and fire stations, but there are signs that the medical establishment is so much a part of the urban scene that specialization in this area may grow even more. (Peavy)

Urban Power, Alienation (Majority and Minority) & Decisions

If the urban audience needs a mental image of the city, seeks values which implement it, and faces changes, then it must make hard decisions. This often takes place in the atmosphere of fractured urban citizenship: divisions from city, suburb, state and nation; and other divisions of community and media based upon race, sex, age, life/style and class, often in revolt against "mass" communications or critical of them, even when they are supportive.

In this arena, one sees the conflict of minorities uniting around one aspect of their lives, and the frustration of urban mayors and related majorities with divided allegiance. The press can preach on the gospel of central city problems, yet escape to the safety of the suburbs, while mayors with heavy media agenda items must stay and solve the city's problems. No amount of civic "think tanks" and expertise, media civic leadership, or honeymoons among publishers, station managers and mayors seems to resolve the crisis. Meanwhile, minorities understandably work for their own self-interest and suggest it also is in the public interest, and the amazing fact is that anything gets accomplished.

This then becomes the major area for functional beats reflecting the major concerns of the urban audience: taxpayers supporting the governmental system.

it is an area where political and government reporting is concentrated and where the press is also a part of the power structure. (Banfield, Clark, Fain, Sonn, Long, Reasons &Goodman) Community needs centering on human relations, political power and order, and education and information might be more suitable beats than emphases on mere anti-social actions such as crime and conflict with which the government must deal; on mere coverage of events and actions within government buildings; on mere attention to schools, rather than the total education of the community.

The decision beat might focus on how the characteristics of race, relition, age, sex, class and life/style all interact and conflict, and yet co-exist and how adjustments are worked out and how the media can facilitate this. Cooperation rather than crime might be the mental trigger for the news story. It might be the sociology or poeple beat, with focus on how diversity in human groups can be resolved if there is communication and education rather than alienation.

The government beat (still dominated by emphasis on conflict rather than cooperation) is given great attention by the press because of its rich supply of news in quanitity and because it is a competing "government" in the city. The urban audience needs to know how decisions are made and how they are raised, who is involved, who benefits and who gets hurt by decisions, and how the press itself is involved in polititcs and has power to open and close debate, and can facilitate the democratic process.

Education beats are dominated by schools rather than with the larger task of the media showing how information is curculated, how information can help urban citizens cope with problems, create their media and images of community, and how and where to get information and evaluate the performance of those institutions (media, schools etc.) which are charged with the transmission of the culture and the education of citizens for the urban environment. Often the

establishment point of the view of the news sources prevails over the communication needs of the urban audience, although signs of consumer journalism are changing that trend. So, the urban audience needs information to deal with conflict among diverse groups, promote harmony and make decisions. Government, human relations and information/education are interwoven in this urban functional area. If structure and design are skeleton; if values and challenge to their stability in an economic and health sense are the urban muscle; and if the decisions and conflict are the tissues of the urban body, then the relationship to the natural environment is the next beat and characteristic of the urban audience, which is mortal and finite.

Ecological Pressures and the Urban Growth Ethic in Media

The crisis resulting from world-wide urban pressures on the natural environment are somewhat recent in their scope. The urban ecological systems are beginning to clash universally with urban processes as the democratic and growth ethic and "bigger is better" face notions that "smaller is beautiful", that "more is not more, but less". The civic superlative of growth is being challenged by the enviromuckrakers, eco-tactics, and eco-journalism.

In dealing with the potential and limits of the natural environment, there is a need for the urban audience to understand that its own desire for goods and the "politics of the body" may be limited. The environmental movement of the 1970s is over despite the well-informed futility on that social problem. (Wiebe, Chase, Schoenfeld, Meier, Griffin)

The urban audience was often pictured by the media as consumers rather than citizens of the "politics of the soul" (Kincaid) and the possibility that mass manking might be a threat to the earth's ecological systems was not a common thread in liberal media. Although there were signs in the 1970s, that the false bridge between nature and the city never existed, the "natural disaster" remains a cliche in the news content.

What is needed is a beat in which the area of natural resources, ecology and the natural environment are related to man-made urban pressures and population, and how the media themselves are part of the problem of pollution either through consumerism or waste of resources in newsprint or air waves, and more so through the growth ethic in both news and ads.

There is a need for the urban audience to see that weather, for example, is good or bad only in relation to the needs for water or sunshine in urban and rural communities. Pollution might be seen as an automatic result of life-styles and not a devil caused by shortages of energy or nature's poor choices for city sites. The forces of agriculture, geology and wildlife have not been woven into the mentality of the urban audience by a well organized specialty on the natural environment. The press worship of the low density and auto life/style is often not related to problems of energy supply. Nor are urban waste and consumption patterns linked sufficiently to the land and agriculture. Wildlife in the city remains a media curiosity and the write-offs and costs of land use are often buried under civic boosterism.

A final area about which the urban audience is concerned, if it survives the "natural disasters" of ecological collapse, is the future of the city and the demise of traditional community of central place.

The Future of Media in Metropolis

The escapism and privatization sought by urban audiences seeking to cope with communications overload and stress and cultural pluralism are bringing more power to communications technology to serve in place of community. If media replace community and human contact, what are the consequences for the notion of society? (Pawley, Meier, Lerner, Bell, Vacca, Stavrianos).

While the media naturally applaud new electronic technology, the idea of "wired cities", new town Disneyworlds, and satellites, the instant and transient "community" of the swarming rockfests and Woodstocks deny central place and some say social responsibility. Communications technology is also now being

used by the urban audience for violence in such ways as high-jackings, certain pseudo-events, obscene phone calls, vandalism, etc.

Perhaps in this area, the leisure, recreation and entertainment beat belongs in place of the traditional sports beat which is tied to the civic growth establishment and civic boosterism. Such a new beat might show how urbanism brings leisure, vicarious participation, the need for status, the post-industrial lonliness of having "nothing to do", the decline of self-image and the need for models in the popular culture. In this area, the media are indeed creator and reporter of the mediated culture.

The media might help balance devotion and interest in the mass and creative personal aspects of leisure time and its use. The impact of communications technology may endanger human contact and interaction as these relationships are mediated by an impersonal technology. If energy is available to make communications a substitute for transtportation, there are dengers that the urban audience will take seriously the idea that "the telephone is being there without the worry of being close". Communications technology is slowly being used to separate people rather than to bring community and contact.

The overwhelming need is for media to facilitate the functions of community for the urban audience with a systems approach to reporting. This means new urban journalism concepts and approaches. (Gapp, Clay, Sachsman, Lyford, DeMott, Hunt et al) The forces of urbanization are so pervasive and world wide, due in part to communications, that media can hardly be separated from the "urbenvironment". Communication and the community are also inseparable.

Above all, the media must look outside their own castles and their own communications cubicles to see the community of urban reality of which they are a part. Vision, values, change, decisions, crises and possible community decline are problems "out there" and deserve more attention that the "news from nowhere" Communications appears by its nature to be more communal than individualistic, so the view from "out there" is essential in defining the characteristics, traits

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and qualities of the urban audience.

Media forms such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, tend to define both the nature of journalism education as well as the practice of journalism. These forms are not necessarily the total communications systems and experience of the community. If education and journalism are to relate more to the community, there needs to be more concern about the nature of the urban audience and its vision, values, changes, decisions, crises, and decline.

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